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### From social grooming in primates to body boundary cognition in humans

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## **Abstract for Cognitive Futures in the Humanities Oxford 2015**

**Title:** From social grooming in primates to body boundary cognition in humans

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### **Abstract**

Social grooming is a cooperative behaviour that represents an integral part of primates' day-to-day activity. Grooming does not only serve to maintain hygiene, it also represents an important social function, such as courtship and mating, social bonding, and conflict resolution. The stress reducing effects of the skin stimulation in social grooming has been also associated with the release of the neuropeptide oxytocin that plays a role in pair-bonding (Dunbar, 1996, 2010). The evolutionary basis of social bonding through the stimulation of the bodily skin membrane also relates to the maintenance of social relational ties in humans.

Cognitive theories hold that humans direct their visual attention to the containing and surface percepts in their environment due to their conscious experience of being contained by a skin boundary (Fisher & Cleveland, 1958; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Consistent with this view, psycholinguistic research demonstrated that individuals with more definite body boundaries, or socially-orientated High Barrier personalities, use more semantic domains related to surface and container-schematic imagery, as well as figurative mappings onto bodily parts and processes, in the recall of autobiographical memories, compared to solitary Low Barrier personalities (Cariola, 2014). The use of surface and container imagery, as well as bodily figurative mappings, reflect a part-whole self-other relationship in which the social environment becomes part of the bodily schema through verbally simulated stimulation of the high-excitatory skin membrane. Such a simulated stimulation of the human skin surface might represent a culturally evolved form of primate social grooming by preserving selectively its cooperative benefits meanwhile maintaining social physical distance. The notion of skin simulation as a primordial cognition has implications for human social-group perceptions, such as the discursive presentation of political ideologies.

## References

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